

Counties trying to find juvenile justice money

By Kristi Pihl, Herald staff writer

Benton and Franklin county commissioners are searching for money to shut the "revolving door" for juvenile criminals at the bicounty juvenile justice center.

But even finding \$187,000 to increase the detention center's bed capacity and limit early release of juvenile inmates may just be a temporary solution.

Sharon Paradis, juvenile justice administrator, told commissioners Monday that state cuts could erase the benefits of any increased county funding for juvenile justice.

She expects the state to make more cuts to juvenile justice in the next two-year budget, but said no one knows yet what those will be.

Detention is meant for the most serious offenders, Paradis said, and it's frustrating to have the teens released early because of lack of bed space.

"It gives the wrong message to kids," she said.

In the last 15 months, detention has released 133 youths early, Paradis said. About half have returned to complete their time at a later date, and the other half had the remaining time forgiven.

That's a result of cuts to juvenile justice that meant that starting in 2010 the juvenile justice center went from about a 50-bed capacity to 35, Paradis said.

Juvenile justice would need an additional \$187,000 to fund three detention officers and other costs to get back to 50 beds, Paradis said.

Other problems with the state and county budget cuts are less obvious than detention, but are more serious in terms of decreasing the likelihood a kid will commit another crime in the future, Paradis said. She said studies show detention isn't an effective deterrent.

Early intervention and prevention services are more effective in keeping kids out of detention or jail, Paradis said.

Paradis said she's also concerned with increasing gang activity in the area. She said 50 percent to 70 percent of the youths in detention are involved with a gang.

Just increasing county funding back to what it was before reductions may not be the answer, said Benton County Commissioner Jim Beaver. He said federal and state governments are continuing to pass down costs to local governments.

Administrators from both counties will meet in a committee with juvenile justice staff to form a plan for funding detention operations, Beaver said.

He said he thinks the problem can be addressed in the short term, but the counties also need to find a long-term solution.

"Our funding is going to get smaller, not larger," he said.

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